

The Indian

By Jack Ritchie & Steve Ritchie

NOTE: Jack Ritchie was working on this story when he passed away on April 23rd, 1983.

Who would be the first to miss him?
Claire?

He smiled slightly. No, not Claire. He could be gone for days and she probably wouldn't even notice.

Probably Simpson. Yes, Simpson would notice right away. He would wonder where the hell old faithful Charlie was this morning. If he's home sick, why didn't he call in?

Yes, Simpson would then ask his secretary if there'd been a phone call from Charlie. She would say no, she didn't think so, and then she'd ask around the office.

She would come back and tell Simpson that there had been no phone calls to anyone about anything. Charlie just hadn't checked in this morning and nobody had seen him. He wasn't at his desk and nobody knew anything about anything.

Simpson would frown over that for a while and then he'd pick up the phone and dial.

His mind went back to the dead Indian.

Claire had wanted to take the cave tour, so Charles read the brochure very carefully. He could see from it that the customers taking the tour just followed a guide through a path lined with railings. They didn't have to do any crawling. So Charles had decided that he would go with her.

It had been the first time Charles had ever gone into a cavern. He and Claire were members of a group of about twenty people and they were led by a guide who

talked about the history of the place as he pointed out the points of interest.

It was quite a civilized, well-lighted cave. They followed the guide down the graveled paths, the boardwalks, and the catwalks over the streams and pits as he explained how the features of the cave had formed over the millennia.

The Indian's remains had been part of the tour. The skeleton lay under a glass case, highlighted by its own floodlight. The Indian's dry skull lay in its nest of long gray hair and the body lay on its side, knees slightly drawn up. Charley could make out three separate blankets around the body. A small clay pot sat just beyond its fingers.

The guide told them that the body was estimated to have been dead over one hundred and fifty years. He told them the Indian had probably gotten lost exploring the cavern, and that he must have died of starvation while trying to find his way out.

Charles had wondered how the Indian had gotten into the cave in the first place. He couldn't have come in the way they did. There would have been no graveled paths or catwalks passing over the deep crevasses then. He realized there must be other entrances to the cavern. Maybe dozens.

Claire had stared at the corpse for a moment and said "ugh" dutifully and they had moved on.

The ringing phone woke Claire.

She opened her eyes and stared at the clock on the night table. Nine in the morning. Who the hell would be calling this early? Her friends knew better. She swung her legs out from under the covers and sat up on the side of the bed.

She picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"This is Simpson. Charlie's boss."

"Yes, Mr. Simpson," Claire yawned as she reached for a cigarette.

"Charlie hasn't shown up for work this morning. Is he sick?"

Claire drew deeply on the cigarette and sighed. When Charlie got sick he was just like a dog that liked to go off into the woods to lie down and wait to get well or die. He wanted to be alone.

"Could you hold the line for a few seconds, Mr. Simpson?"

She stubbed the cigarette out in the crystal ashtray and got out of bed. Ignoring the mules on the scatter rug, she stepped out into the small hall. She turned the doorknob to Charlie's room and peeked inside.

Well, Charlie wasn't in bed and it had been made. He always made his bed after he got up. So he made his bed and then he must have gone downstairs to make his breakfast like usual. Then he went to work. Maybe he got stuck in some traffic jam or the car broke down on the way.

She returned to the phone. "Mr. Simpson?"

"Yes?"

"Charlie left this morning like usual, right after I made him breakfast," she said. "He hasn't come back. Maybe his car broke down somewhere."

"Well, maybe. Thank you." Simpson hung up.

Claire put down the receiver. Hell, hope I can get back to sleep again. She slid under the covers and closed her eyes.

Charles had come out of the cave into the daylight feeling strangely relaxed. Walking through the underground passages had done something to him, changed him. It was almost like finding something you've been looking for all your life. He had really wanted to take the tour again

and stare at the Indian, but Claire hadn't been interested in going through a second time.

After they had gotten home, he had gone to the library to find more information about caves. He was disappointed to find there weren't too many books about them, or about cave exploring.

In the few books he did find there were photos of the spelunkers crawling through caves deep underground. Often they would have to crawl for tens of feet through tight passages before to get to the caverns they explored. Even reading about them had given Charles a slight feeling of claustrophobic panic.

He had never realized the extent of the caves under the ground; they were almost everywhere. Thousands and thousands of miles of caves. Not all of them were the cramped channels spelunkers liked to explore. You could walk underground all the way across some states. Walk. Not crawl or squeeze through....

At ten o'clock, Simpson stepped out of his office and brought up the matter again. "Evie, has Charlie called or come in yet?"

His secretary looked up from her typewriter. "No, sir. No one's called."

Simpson frowned. "Where the hell is he? I can't imagine why he wouldn't have called, if he could have. Maybe he was in some kind of accident?"

"It's possible, sir," she said as she flipped her notepad to the next sheet.

Simpson sighed. "Well, I guess we'll find out when somebody gets around to telling us."

After lunch, he dialed Charlie's number again. The line was busy. And still busy ten minutes later.

Simpson tried again at two o'clock, and then at three. No one answered the phone.

To hell with it, he decided. But then he tried once again just before he left for the

day. There was no answer.

There was more information on caves available from the state DNR. Basic facts on how caves formed, the conditions inside, and a few small maps. The maps only went as far as amateur cavers had explored, since the state had never formally mapped the caverns itself.

Charlie requested, and quickly received, larger copies of the maps. Though incomplete, they showed there was much more to the caverns than was seen on the tour. Easily tens times as many caves and passages than were shown as a part of the tour. Areas that had most likely been mapped once, and never explored again.

He was right about one thing, there was more than one entrance to the cave he and Claire had toured. The maps showed several, one of them not too far from the freeway he took every day to work.

It was nearly eleven when Claire woke again. She ran a tongue around the inside of her mouth and grimaced. Her feet found her mules and she shuffled to the bathroom. After she had brushed her teeth she went down the stairs to the kitchen and put on water for the coffee.

While she waited for it to come to a boil, she stared vacantly out of the window. Lord, another gloomy day. She put a heaping spoon of instant coffee into a cup and added sugar. When the water came to a boil, she poured it into the cup and stirred.

She carried the cup on a saucer into the living room and turned on the TV set. The talk shows were on. Nothing about sex today, kinky or otherwise. She switched to *The Young and the Restless*. She shook a cigarette out of a pack and lit it with a book match.

During the commercial, she picked up the newspaper from the cocktail table. A

line caught her eye. Well, well, some kind of a prostitution ring in the boondocks outside of Cleveland. Bunch of bored housewives. They did it for the money, they said. Maybe.

Wonder if something like that could ever happen in this neighborhood? Where would they get the customers? Most of the men here were gone all day and with their wives and kids at night. She thought about old man Gregory down the street. Retired, but he still had the eye and he used it and would still probably use something else. The thought made her laugh. She wouldn't let that old bastard touch her even for a hundred dollars.

The phone rang and Claire picked it up. It was Maggie, who lived next door and probably just got out of bed too.

"Anything doing?" Maggie asked.

"Nothing," Claire said, and then remembered. "Charlie's boss called this morning. Charlie didn't show up for work. At least not by nine."

"Maybe his car broke down or something. Why don't you come on over? We can rustle up a bridge game or something."

Claire glanced at her watch. "See you in half an hour."

She turned off the TV set and went back upstairs to dress. When she came down she opened the door to the garage and saw that Charlie's car was gone. Well, at least he had left here all right in the morning. Maybe the idiot got himself into an accident. But if that happened the police or somebody would have notified her by now.

No, probably his car just broke down on the way to work and he had to have it towed to some garage. Then he would have taken a taxi the rest of the way to the office and got there late.

Claire played bridge at Maggie's until they all got tired of it and ran out of things

to talk about. She went back home after five and looked in the refrigerator. Nothing much, but hell she wasn't hungry anyway — those pretzel sticks at Maggie's had filled her up.

She looked at the wall clock. Charley would be home by six. She took a frozen dinner out of the freezer compartment and shoved it in the oven.

As it cooked she went to her bedroom to change to an evening dress.

When Claire came home again it was eleven-thirty in the evening. When she put her car away in the garage, she saw that Charlie's car still wasn't there.

I was right, she thought. Something went wrong with his car and it's in some garage now. She let herself into the dark house.

She made herself a drink and took it into the living room. Charlie's in bed already. He always goes to bed early. She turned on the TV to Box Office television. Hell, she'd seen that movie before. She tried the other stations, cursing whenever she came across a commercial. There was nothing interesting. Hell, she might as well have another drink and go to bed.

Lord, she was bored. Stuck here in this

house. And it was another three weeks before Charlie would get his vacation and they could go someplace exciting. Like the Bahamas or Bermuda or someplace where there was a lot of sun and she could get out and meet new people. Interesting people.

No, Charles thought, the Indian hadn't gotten lost while exploring the cave. He had come there to die. He had been sick and he knew he was dying and he wanted to die alone.

And so he had taken three blankets with him because he did not want to die cold. He had taken the small pot so that he would have something to hold water because he did not want to die of thirst.

He had gone into the cave and followed the steam until he had found the spot where he wanted to die. He had filled the pot with water and then he had lain down beside it and pulled the three blankets around him.

Had the water been enough for the last moments of his life or had it been necessary to crawl back to the stream and refill it? ◆